

Too Many Remotes? Thank Cable Outfits

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They stand in the way of creating a central control for your home entertainment system by burying a key part this -- the Cablecard

As home entertainment systems grow more complex, it makes increasing sense to have something in charge of the octopus of players, displays, and video and audio sources. Today, to watch a movie, I have to find the remote that goes with my display and see which of its seven inputs is connected to the DVD player. I'd rather just click "play DVD" on a menu.

This simple idea is difficult to implement when PCs are part of the mix, and a major reason is the difficulty of integrating cable television into the system. A device called a Cablecard, which is supposed to eliminate the need for a cable set-top box, could be a huge help. But Cablecards aren't easy to find, they don't work with Microsoft's (MSFT) Media Center PC software, and, the way things stand now, they don't completely replace the box.

BATTLING THE FCC. The cable box performs two different services: It decodes the digital cable signal into a format your TV can display. And it tells the cable system what channels you are authorized to view, a function called conditional access. Your PC can actually take care of the decoding. So can a TiVo (TIVO) box or any number of other electronic devices. But if you decide to go this route -- managing your TV through something other than a cable box -- you'll need the credit-card-size Cablecard to provide the conditional access.

Federal Communications Commission rules require cable services to rent Cablecards to anyone who wants one, typically for about \$2 a month. Unfortunately, the companies don't go out of their way to promote the cards. (Search Comcast's (CMCSA) Web site, and you won't even find a mention of them.) The industry is battling an FCC requirement that would force them to provide Cablecards for all set-top boxes, including TiVos and PCs, by July, 2006. That would free consumers from the need to rent boxes.

My experiences testing an Alienware DHS 2 computer, based on Media Center software, show why a Cablecard is so badly needed. The DHS 2, which starts at \$1,579, is a black box that looks more like a stereo receiver than the PC it is. It has all the features of Windows XP, and it provides just the sort of centralized control I am looking for -- or it would, if my cable system would cooperate.

CRIPPLED CARDS. Alas, to get a TV signal from my Comcast digital cable box to the DHS 2, or to a video recorder, I must use an additional device called an IR blaster. And even then, the cable box won't transmit high-definition TV signals. The upshot is, I can use the Alienware PC to play CDs, watch digital videos, or play digital music, but for TV, the cable system has to bypass it and connect directly to the television.

Microsoft will eventually offer a more useful version of the Media Center that can take a Cablecard. And TiVo plans a Cablecard-based video recorder. These products may be premature -- nice as it would be to get rid of the set-top box. The current Cablecards are badly crippled because they don't give you access to the usual program guide provided by your cable company.

You also lose the ability to order pay-per-view programs and watch movies and other shows on demand. A new generation of Cablecards that enables these services is planned, but the new cards won't work in current Cablecard-ready gear.

BEYOND GRUDGING ACCEPTANCE. One alternative to a Cablecard is a set-top box that can supply digital video to a recorder or other component. FCC rules require cable companies to

supply such boxes, but the regulation is not being enforced. And there is a chance that such systems might eventually be rendered obsolete by changes in copy-protection technology.

I hope the FCC not only sticks to its guns on Cablecard regulations but also pushes cable operators to move beyond grudging acceptance and make the cards truly useful. Meanwhile, I'll grumpily stick with my set-top box and the multiple remotes of a system that at least works.